SELF-DIRECTED learning (SDL) refers to various methods of learning that make students accountable for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their learning.1 The needs of the student are the basis for learning, with greater emphasis on the learning process than the learning outcome. Many millennial students think of themselves as being able to make their own decisions, face the consequences of these decisions, and manage their learning.2 To develop higher-order cognitive skills (e.g., critical thinking, decision-making), upper level undergraduate students (i.e., junior or senior level students) should be afforded the opportunity to become self-directed in their learning experiences.3

The process of self-directed learning is centered on the learner's needs, emphasizing the learning process rather than the content.4

A central premise of SDL is the notion of student autonomy.5 Students have a desire to control and individualize learning experiences to accommodate needs and interests.6 Self-direction focused solely on content neglects the critical component of obtaining meaning from the learning experience.7 Thus, SDL must include acceptance of responsibility to construct meaning and monitor one's own learning process, emphasizing personal action and responsibility.8

The self-directed learning process enables students to think critically and to become reflective in their learning. Students have little input on what they learn or how they learn from teacher-directed learning.6 Self-directed learning utilizes instructional strategies that enable students to plan, monitor, reflect upon, and assess their own learning.2 The purpose of the report is to present self-directed learning instructional strategies and to provide examples of its use in didactic and clinical education.

Key Points

Learners see themselves as being able to make their own decisions regarding learning.

Self-directed learning enables athletic training students to assume more responsibility for their learning through a process of planning, monitoring, reflecting, and evaluating.

The process of self-directed learning is centered on the learner's needs, emphasizing the learning process rather than the content.

Self-Directed Learning Instructional Strategies

Planning Self-Directed Learning

SDL emphasizes that students assume the responsibility for their learning experiences.1,5 The role of the facilitator is to clarify the purposes of the educational process, establish learning priorities, assist students in assessing their educational needs, identify accessible resources, and enable students to evaluate their self-directed learning efforts.8

When planning learning experiences, the facilitator needs to assist students in identifying their learning needs.1,5 The role of the facilitator is to select learning activities and strategies that allow students to achieve their learning needs. Despite the autonomy
involved in SDL, the fact that learning does not occur in complete isolation should be emphasized. For example, an athletic training student (ATS) can choose how he or she wants to meet the learning objectives to gain competency in the performance of an evaluation of the hip. Demonstration of competency could include an independent or group evaluation. Self-directed learners are encouraged to collaborate with one another throughout the learning process.9 A skilled facilitator will encourage the student to seek learning experiences in both an individual and group context.

Monitoring Self-Directed Learning

Monitoring the repertoire of learning activities that a student chooses for the construction of personal meaning from the learning experience is imperative.5 Monitoring SDL ensures that new and existing knowledge is integrated in a meaningful manner. Effective monitoring of SDL requires attention from both the student and the facilitator. Greater responsibility for one’s learning means that the students must think about what they want to learn, how they want to go about learning, and which assessment criteria for learning will be used. Ultimately, the students determine whether or not the learning experience was satisfactory.3

Reflection in Self-Directed Learning

To be a self-directed learner is to be a critical thinker.5 Reflection represents the most important part of the SDL process, which requires students to analyze and clarify their learning experiences.7 Self-directed learning is not limited to a specific setting or context.6 Through reflection, students evaluate their ideas, actions, and behaviors, thereby seeking to understand the meaning held within the process.

Assessing Self-Directed Learning

Students should continually engage in formative and summative assessments of their learning, while the facilitator is simultaneously assessing their learning.1 Internal feedback alone may lack accuracy,5 which necessitates involvement of the facilitator. Formative assessments allow students to refine their learning experiences while engaged in the learning process. Summative assessments allow students to examine the learning process as a whole and to assess the effectiveness of their self-directed efforts. Both types of assessments are important to ensure that students remain engaged in their learning.6

Self-Directed Learning in Didactic Education

Self-directed learning techniques can easily be incorporated into athletic training didactic education, particularly in upper level courses. Self-directed learning can also help senior-level ATSs to prepare for the Board of Certification (BOC) exam. Examples of incorporation of SDL into didactic education include the following:

1. Planning Self-Directed Learning. Plan learning activities that allow students to assess their own knowledge and understanding of a particular topic. For example, provide current evidence-based practice techniques pertaining to therapeutic ultrasound. Students will be learning current evidence-based practice techniques, while also beginning to determine the additional learning needs they have related to therapeutic ultrasound.

2. Monitoring Self-Directed Learning. Be a facilitator, not a lecturer. As a facilitator, the role of the instructor becomes less oriented to dissemination of knowledge. Facilitation of learning places more emphasis on providing the tools necessary for learning, including learning objectives and learning resources. The student becomes responsible for identifying specific learning goals and developing the process to meet (or exceed) learning goals and objectives. For example, the facilitator might assist students in interpreting evidence-based practice guidelines in a meaningful way to acquire a better understanding of the uses for therapeutic ultrasound (i.e., indications, contraindications).

3. Reflection in Self-Directed Learning. Integrate reflection into learning activities. Provide students with the opportunity for reflection on their previous learning experiences in the classroom. By including reflection, students can identify areas of study that are pertinent and important to future athletic training practice. Reflection will also enable to students to make connections between concepts learned in didactic and clinical education. For example, reflective learning journals, completed on a weekly or bimonthly basis, provide a means for incorporating reflection into the learning process. Having students reflect on what they are learning about the evidence-based guidelines for utilization of therapeutic ultrasound and their experiences with clinical application of the modality during